

# DELTA

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# DELTA

The Cambridge Literary Magazine

EDITED BY ANDREW ROBERTS

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## Editorial

*Delta* has changed its cover for the first time in its six years' history. No startling change should be read into this beyond a renewed emphasis on *Delta* as Cambridge's literary magazine. In the nature of things, the Cambridge of to-day is likely to have a noticeable effect on English literary life in the next twenty years, so that anyone interested in the exchange of ideas and emotions in their own generation should take an active interest in the work of contemporaries who are at least tackling the problems of literary expression in this place and age. *Delta* isn't aimed at those who want a complete satisfaction from everything they read: it's aimed at those who care enough about literature to find rewarding the discovery of new talent, new expression, however fragmentary and unformed it may be, who care enough about 'the classics' to want their appreciation of them sharpened by the testing of critical faculties and contact with their own times which only new writing can supply.

*Delta* exists to help Cambridge writers both by giving them an audience and by providing a context of literary judgments from which they can profit as writers. We welcome articles on literature of any place or time which have some bearing on the problems and possibilities facing the contemporary writer. There shouldn't really be any glaring disparity between the critical standards adopted in critical articles and reviews and those operating in the poetry or fiction, if the creative work can be shown at least to respect, indeed to imply, such standards, even if it falls a good deal short of them in execution. To help make this connection, and to make the Cambridge writer feel that his work is being sympathetically followed, and not judged for more than it is, we hope in our next number to be able to accompany poems and stories by criticism of sufficient length to show some understanding of the writer's aims, and some evaluation of his virtues as well as his weaknesses. This kind of enterprise has been deplored in the past as no more than a twisted form of mutual admiration society, but it seems only fair that people who are just beginning to learn how to write well should have a chance of criticism more considered than that of conversation, and more detailed than either *Varsity* or *Broadsheet*—let alone the national press—can reasonably be expected to provide. And, of course, the critics will be on trial too.

Meanwhile, we invite contributions of fiction, imaginative *reportage*, poetry and criticism, to reach the Editor by December 10th, accompanied by a stamped addressed envelope.

## *Go, Get You Home, You Fragments*

Through tubes and tunnels is the rat-race run.  
Face searches face

for what small words

Shapes and noises under the press.

Where have they come from, where will they all get out,  
Gatecrashers at this thrash where nobody was invited?

We can't move; we were chosen; told to carry  
Two large cases of books and harpsichord music.  
You, strap-hanger, clinging under the door,  
Sure of a handhold; you may escape,  
Surface at any stop to a different date :  
Profiteer stonework, impoverished stucco,  
Bungalow; one to-night with a cooped-up girl  
(Your hairy wrist grows out of her slender arm)  
Travelling only as far as is worth your standing.

Only for us the length of a line that is running  
Out beyond anywhere anyone knows what to ask about.

ANDREW ROBERTS.

## *For William Cullen Bryant*

When the rank air lifted from the marsh  
And yellowness was everywhere  
You were still scouring the flats,  
Hunting like some wildfowler of the mind.  
When the evening extended the glazed acres  
Of the delta, you were caught against the skyline,  
Your eyeglass poised. Curious that such  
Devoted care should end not in myopia  
But in longrange blurring of the close at hand;  
That the textbook should ask for minute  
Instances not given. Well, there's no one out  
On the estuary any longer, and the preserve  
Has been handed back to the laity.  
But someone will resume the rights, I dare say,  
Sooner or later; and in the plashy banks  
There may yet be a nest. No need to dredge  
The remoter ponds. Yours was the first log,  
And the flowers' species hold to your scheme.  
It was time that the streaks of the tulip  
Should be numbered, and a recount may be overdue.

PAT ROGERS.

## *Reflections on T. F. Powys*

It may be said at once that T. F. Powys was not a great creative writer. The reader who has been moved and disturbed by what is truly significant in Powys' art will record this impression with reluctance, while recording at the same time that he has met with a spirit finer than his own, with a richly meditated experience, and with an integrity that has yielded insights that will normally be his only for purposes of appropriation. Not many of us, and not many writers, can offer so unrelenting a scrutiny of fundamental preoccupations: and the sympathetic reader will also note his sense of the cruel injustice that criticism—or what passes for such—has done to Powys. The great proportion of his works is largely unobtainable, and for what he counts for in the experience of most of us he might as well have never written a word. One who admires Powys, then, is naturally anxious that he should have some kind of recognition, and takes upon himself the obligation. In other words, he would like to help the best of Powys to come into the scope of the reflecting reader, not as a 'subject', or a fringe enthusiasm for those of us who do not happen to live in the country, but as something felt in the reader's own life, as someone who may be turned to with confidence in the cryptic blether about 'new' writing and the recurring thud of volumes of one kind and another on Yeats and Joyce. But an attempt to describe what one has got out of Powys is a more difficult job than most, in that one who attempts it is displaying what so far has had the barest acceptance, and which he may feel certain will be speedily and confidently rejected. Powys provides no amenities for research students, and no opportunities for a well-read contemporaneity, or for the kind of dismal scholarship with which a literary education seems now to have to justify itself. An experience of him is gained by reading, and by reading in the employment of abilities not much in demand these days. What one has between most of his covers is the deliberate, rendered achievement of a significant English writer, and this is necessarily matter for enthusiasm on the part of plain men.

A critic will acknowledge that he has in Powys a subject of peculiar difficulty. An original imagination found available for its use a variety of materials; the Bible, Shakespeare, certain 17th century divines, Bunyan, Jane Austen, the Dorset world in which it matured. These and others combine in the rich allegorical presentation of modes of life that had gone largely unobserved for many centuries; a unique and in some ways constricted English sensibility brought to bear in a particular kind of moral debate. Irresistibly the modern reader will associate the art with the art of *Measure for Measure* and *The Winter's Tale*, and with the art of those whom he knows among Shakespeare's predecessors; and in making such an association, he will also have to make certain im-

portant qualifications. He will have to speak, for example, of a certain monotony of creation. Certain villains re-appear in Powys' writings, archetypes of greed, cruelty and selfishness, whom the reader soon knows and to some extent loses interest in. We have Mrs. Vosper triumphantly in 'Mr. Weston's Good Wine', and the bland, ironic comedy of Miss Pettifer in *Innocent Birds*—but we also have Charlie Tulk, Mr. Bugby, Jimmy Peddle and Mr. Tasker's father, who could be interchanged without significant alteration in their separate tales. One is driven to reservations about an art that seems to require that degree of provocation to warm it into life, and one's reservations become sharper, just in proportion as the central figure or figures appear as inertly acted upon, rendered through simple reiterated gestures, or just not present with any conviction at all. Human vindictiveness, one may feel, is permitted to act as too large a stimulus in the creation of the fable, or rather Powys' apprehension of it is over stringent, so that it is dislocated from its place as an element, a dark element, in the whole fabric of his experience. Any doubt that might be felt about this does not spring from any simple sense of the 'goodness' of human beings, but rather from the demonstrable conviction that the fact that his 'good' characters are nearly always on the edge of events suggests an impairing of real vitality. The conviction is reinforced when it may be shown that the 'evil' of some of his characters is mechanically induced, and that the impression left by a novel like *Mr. Tasker's Gods* is finally one of disordered repulsion. The Reverend Hector Turnbull, one of the principal figures of the novel, is initially a masterly study in cruel hypocrisy:—

"Mrs. Turnbull was a woman who accepted her daily life just as she accepted her daily bread, prayed for, and presented to her by Mr. Turnbull upon the end of a long knife."

"So far, since his death, all she felt was that a sound, a groaning, grumbling, crunching sound that she had heard continuously for forty years, had ceased."

But it is not with the inevitability of art that the Reverend Hector Turnbull is made to die a wretched death in pursuit of a girl in a dingy back bedroom. And the separate vices, genteel and venal, of his sons, appear as things tacked on, as trailing along behind the character. Nor is one disposed to accept, in the literal spirit in which it is offered, the implications of the following:—

"When near her, Henry felt other realities, other truths, other joys, than any that he had ever before beheld. There was about her a clearness of effect like the delicate curve of a snowdrift. The clear brightness of her pathway made it impossible for her ever to lose her way. If the brute passions of men ever crossed her light, she looked right through them, and her light shone still."

The prim stiffness of the prose makes one search for radically other points of view. There is the risk of a real unfairness, of course, in suggesting that the malevolence is mechanically induced. *Mr. Tasker's Gods* has moments of shocking power in its diagnosis of what men can do; but nevertheless the scales are unfairly weighted, and the conclusion proposes itself that some profound disorganisation in Powys' own being, something evident in the strains and false resolutions of the work, partially obscures the thwarting of a really living imagination. 'Partially obscures', because even such a marred achievement is an impressive witness to the integrity with which its author faced what he took his problem to be. Necessarily, a careful reader will establish his criterion on what he believes to be Powys' best things, and in doing so will report on another weakness. There are tales in, for example, *The White Paternoster* that merely go through the motions of creation, which are produced without any critical sense on the part of the author; frail bits of things recording some fitful impression of good or evil that are taken almost as soon as glanced it. Without paradox, though, one may say that one is anxious to respect such moments of respite as Powys was able to win from his essential purpose as a moralist and a moralist with so inhibiting a grasp upon things like the following :—

"In each woman's mind desires had been set in motion by the sight of the money. These desires grew legs like spiders. They began to free their fat sticky bodies from the mind's mud. This mud was the same as a toad loves to sleep in, only it was denser, colder, more congealed. The desires were like toads, only with spiders' legs. At first they gripped things with these spiders' legs. Little things that women can take easily : a tablecloth, a piece of carpet, a worn curtain, an old firescreen. When the spiders' legs held to a thing, an eye was born in the sticky bodies. Each desire grew fatter as it rolled in the mind's mud; they touched many things and became full of eyes."

The extract is from *Mark Only*, a work of sombre accounting, relieved only by the sad comedy of the henpecked Mr. Tolly and Mr. Peach, and the simple, unreflecting directness of Mr. Thomas, the sweep, in his search for the girl he wishes to marry. He is virtually the witness of her seduction :—

"Another person, who limped, now came upon the scene from behind the stack. This new arrival followed the girl, and when he reached her he hit her across the legs with his stick in a merry fashion. He also made a pleasant remark to her about country matters that the sweep overheard. . . . Mr. Thomas held his head a little sideways. He had heard a man's voice upon the earth, and now he expected a voice to speak from the sky. The voice did speak :—

"'Best to go and get 'eeself put in dirt,' the voice said.

"Mr. Thomas nodded. But again he heard someone speak-

ing, and this time the voice said : 'But if she bain't married, 'tis best for 'ee to bide above ground.' "

The best things, however, those to which a reader might be unreservedly directed, are *Innocent Birds*, *The Good Earth*, *No Painted Plumage* and *Mr. Weston's Good Wine*—this last indeed being amongst the greatest things that have yet come out of the twentieth century, and certainly Powys' finest single achievement, a rich, moving comic meditation upon the whole significance of human life, and a work of profound religious feeling. The ultimate impression that it leaves behind, or that imposes itself at re-readings, is of a beautiful and delicate rendering of the quality of moral feeling, at once stringent, acquiescent, and wonderfully human, in its respect for the gift of life and for the death that gives it its pressing significance :—

" 'And I buried him in the sand, but the people blamed me for they said, "The young man will never rise, while time is, out of that sleep". '

" 'The people were right,' said Mr. Grunter, 'to blame 'ee for being a murderer.'

" 'I know it,' said Mr. Weston, 'though not a death happens in all the world but I wish it were mine own, and I would have every dying one to know that I long to die with him.'

" 'I bain't ambitious at no time at all,' said Mr. Gunter, 'for such an honour.'

" 'Ah, Grunter, perhaps you would prefer to notice another idea that I thought of, in answer to the prayers of mankind,' said Mr. Weston smiling.

" 'Mr. Grunter wiped his forehead and looked up into the sky.

" 'What be they shining white folk a-doing?' he asked of Mr. Weston.

" 'Only the stars,' replied Mr. Weston, 'only another of my ideas—only the white stars.'

" 'They white stars be dressed funny,' said Grunter, 'for they do bide about like angels, and thik shining woon'—the clerk pointed with his hand — 'be Ada Kiddle, and she be singing.' "

The art is that of allegory, but without the simplifications and evasions that allegory (and Powys' own allegory) is skilful at concealing. The presentation is without deceptive portentousnes, without that deft fiddling that can sometimes be found in, say, Hawthorne (another great allegorist), where the detail, the local perception seems to manifest a vitality that isn't informing the whole thing. The impulsion behind *Mr. Weston's Good Wine* is one of profound affirmation, immediately present in the variety of tones, inflection and shades of emphasis that indicate a close and fine relation with all the complexities of the subject. One has, for

example, in the relation between Jenny Bunce and Luke Bird (who is much more than the sometimes rather unimpressive Holy Fool) the whole power of sexual desire, with its interwoven joy and pain, and the sanctities that should attend its consummation, and handled with a subtle awareness of implication and attitude that speaks for itself against the infelicity of Richard Hoggart's reference to the 'apples be ripe bucolics of T. F. Powys'. It is no matter of broad sensual assertion, but a presentiment of what can be between a man and a woman of quality that sends a reader to Lawrence for a fuller scrutiny. Powys is the lesser artist, of course, but he has his own way of developing his sense of the relation, the suffering involved, the splendid comedy of Luke's growing awareness of what is happening to himself, from his absurd little speech on temperance to the owner of a brewery, his sermons to the bulls, and his marriage to Jenny, his whole life indeed assuming shape and proportion, stature and significance; the art that gives us this is a conduit of life, and the novel as a whole is the work of a writer at the full maturity of very individual powers. The one weakness, it seems to me, that can be noted, is in the handling of Tamar Grobe and her dealings with Michael. Tamar's father is so movingly present in his reclusiveness, with his one brief glimpse of life so quickly denied him, that Tamar herself suggests (to me) a certain insistent 'business', a groping for a significance that is not really there in the girl herself or in the rather too handsome saint who pursues her. Their presentation is not without a certain beauty of effect, however, and this lingers sufficiently to qualify to some extent the real purpose of the book: a nimbus of ambiguity surrounds their treatment. Are they intended as a criterion by which to measure the quality of other passions, other purposes? One agrees, perhaps—though with care where this particular work is in question—because of the more clearly definable ambiguity, amounting to a real uncertainty, that may be felt in *Unclay* and *The Good Earth*. In both these works the consciousness of death, the probing into the circumstances of life, is done with an almost wilful intensity that finally deflects the reader from a sure hold on what is being done. In *The Good Earth* John Gidden's anguished pursuit of what really moves him, his progress through the pride of possession, the pride of lust and the pride of reputation, against the background (or rather as an aspect) of the seasons and the barren, hopeless farm he has to till is done with the fertile economy of a master of the morality, but his final awareness of death (of the Good Earth) as the releasing pressure upon his life, is qualified by the self-destruction that one assumes the work to end in. And in *Unclay* the attraction of death, or rather the doubt as to what it is in human experience, is so strong as to make the actual lives of Joe Bridle and Susie Dawe somewhat deficient in interest. The reader comes away exasperated from his grappling with the problem of what it might be.

*Innocent Birds* is weakened by the thinness, the externally established pathos, that invests its two central figures. The strength of the book lies in the ironic dealings with Miss Pettifer, and the developed assertion of human dignity and the power of kindness and affection; the particular strength and maturity of those who have an unsentimental feelings for human life as they have to take it, whose responsiveness towards and endurance of, what is daily theirs are among the great human qualities—Mr. Solly with his garden and 'History of the Americans,' Mr. Hayhoe's behaviour in the situation that unimagination has forced upon him, Mr. Chick's timid dodging of the grave-digger, and Mr. Pym's puzzled awe before the mysteries of conception, birth and death, challenge the reader's own narrowly drawn assurances. Finally, one might mention *Fables* (reprinted as *No Painted Plumage*), mention merely, in so far as they call for extended treatment of a kind not possible in these few pages. The *Fables* themselves are not all of the same power, though the slighter even, require attention. *The Seaweed and the Cuckoo-clock* may be briefly noted as a fine comic treatment of the theme of the wilful curtailment of experience, and the deliberate imposition of one's own preconceptions upon the variety that surrounds us. But almost none of the fables are capable of simple reduction; their ambiguity this time derives from the nature of their subjects, from the tensions within and the possibilities that confront any deeply felt human situation.

Finally, it remains to draw together into some coherence those attributes of sensibility that have set off the enthusiasm (if it is no more than that) of the foregoing paragraphs. At the centre of Powys' art there is the profoundest respect both for human beings and the life they are given. As a statement it may seem simple enough, or so obvious as to merit unconditional acceptance. But respect for life and for its source in actual people involves recognition of the offences against one's self that other people are liable to commit, and the offences that one is liable to commit one's self. Over-insistence upon one aspect or another, upon, say, social class, vindictiveness, goodness, beneficence, at least of intention, represents a degree of inadequate commitment, foolhardiness, or sheer failure of interest. Powys' own hold upon the materials of his art is sometimes perilous enough, in ways already indicated, but he has, with his impressive seriousness of purpose, the moralising bent of his that is nearly always so much more than a matter of harsh, simple-minded over-conclusiveness, qualities that genuinely relate him to the great masters: a striking humanity, warmth, variety and expansiveness of vision. No reader will propose that these are mere words. His individuality presents itself both in the form he chose for his expression, and the themes that are salient in it. His treatment of sexual relations, for instance, exemplifies a profound commonsense, and is not a simple matter of hot weather and country

matters. (One puts it thus defensively as one feels the charge bristling in the contemporary climate.) And indeed he should be felt as a cleansing agent in any modern discussion of personal morality. It remains to say that he gives a courageous example of really seeing what one thinks one sees, of unflinching commitment to what he apprehended as the conditions of experience. There are times when the reader will not be with him, but there will be no relaxing of sympathy for an effort at penetration so tenacious and so delicate, penetration into the dense medium of appetite, moral decision and human feeling, the finally tragic attempt to construct an archetype of how we live and how we experience.

W. I. CARR.

## *Piece Work*

For all of it, she knew what she was about  
With the down; for all of the spite  
Spent in the piecing, needle-fierce fingered,  
Needle-eyed-piercing, scrappy, angered  
Beyond belief at interruption or thread-knot;  
She knew what puzzling business she was about  
To clip, tack, pink, tie, whipstitch, to defray  
Her heat in the painstaking, and it may be  
That she somehow salvaged warmth enough in her quilt  
To blanket her bare days' heart shortfalling fault.

And he knew how dabs must mass to a careful line,  
What stringing of dull Sundays went into *La Grand*  
*Jatte*, needle-keen-seen, needle-brush-thrust,  
He learned how mind at best is a *pointilliste*  
Salvaging harsh lights from an unmixed palette,  
Which, canvas confronted, daubs, strains, stains to fill it.  
And having illumined what it could, will hurtle  
To hope that some light makes and is made immortal;  
Not that he might have bettered that petty lady,  
Nor her skill delayed the blind young chill of his body.

Warmth, light; obscure mother, cold master;  
How, once knowing the soul a frail imposter,  
Patched, painted, spread in spite, in pride hung,  
To make my fraudpiece at least some ordered thing?  
I am all stone sown upon cold fallow,  
All froth-fill sunk to a bare hollow,  
All, all as a fall pavement, leaf effort strewn,  
And the crisp colours trod with the litter down  
To barren monotone, rag straggle of grief.  
How then pattern the raveling, the stain of life?

JANET BURROWAY.

## *The Ironic Mode: A Poem by Suckling*

It wouldn't yet be precisely true to say that the seventeenth century is old hat. But more and more our attention is being directed elsewhere: to the eighteenth century, in particular, and also to the "romantic revival" embodied in the work of a poet like Darley. And in fact it is now clear that, after a few false alarms, the metaphysical vogue is dead—at least as something to be argued explicitly, defended with ardour, or attacked as subversive. Already the reader tends to react to a book like *The Well-Wrought Urn* with a shrug: what *was* all the fuss about? The major reputations will survive; but some of the poets and poetic virtues discovered in side skirmishing will be lost again. More specifically, we might enquire whether the now accepted notion of irony—non-evasive, tone-directing, not precluding commitment—is one which is genuinely held to by any wide number of readers. It is plain that much criticism of contemporary verse betrays a scorn of irony which someone like Saintsbury or Elton would never have dared to voice. The assumption that gnomic verse nearly always proceeds from an over-subtle ironic intent appears to be gaining, rather than losing, ground. We hear less to-day of cryptic, personal imagery (apart from Graves's "private mythology," which is always good for a mention), and a choice is offered between Movement-wrily non-committal and Maverick-public-open-Logue-committed.

It seems, then, that it would be helpful to look at a particular seventeenth-century poem and the way irony works in it. Suckling's Sonnet is familiar and accessible enough, but it's always as well to have the text down.

*Oh! for some honest Lovers ghost,  
Some kind unbodied post  
Sent from the shades below.  
I strangely long to know  
Whether the nobler Chaplets wear,  
Those that their mistresses scorn did bear,  
Or those that were us'd kindly.*

*For what-so-e'er they tell us here  
To make those sufferings dear  
'Twill there I fear be found,  
That to the being crown'd,  
T'have lov'd alone will not suffice,  
Unless we also have been wise,  
And have our Loves enjoy'd.*

*What posture can we think him in,  
That here unlov'd agen  
Departs, and's thither gone  
Where each sits by his own?*

*Or how can that Elizium be  
Where I my Mistresse still must see  
Circled in others Armes?*

*For there the judges all are just,  
And Sophonisba must  
Be his whom she held dear;  
Not his who lov'd her here :  
The sweet Philoclea since she dy'de  
Loes by her Pirocles his side,  
Not by Amphialus.*

*Some Bayes (perchance) or Myrtle bough  
For difference crowns the brow  
Of those kind souls that were  
The noble Martyrs here;  
And if that be the onely odds  
(As who can tell) ye kinder Gods,  
Give me the Woman here.*

The whole point of this poem is destroyed unless we realise that the apparent concern voiced in the opening stanza is an assumed interest; that for the chaplets being a blind for the poet's real concern for the alternative states of happiness or grief in earthly love. The piece is, indeed, a kind of submerged "persuasion to enjoy", with no particular mistress addressed. The possible arrangements in *Elizium* are teased out with some care, but in reality it is the pitiable state of the unfortunate lover whilst he is on earth which occupies Suckling. And the ending, as well as being extremely funny, is more than an O. Henry twist; if we have responded to the movements of the poem's irony, it represents a sudden breaking out from a mock-solemn consideration of the after life to an exclamation whose immediacy is the greater because its burden has been lying just below the surface all through. Dr. Tillyard, at work on the structure of *Lovers Infinitetness*, calls the ending of that poem "feeble and perfunctory, a nominal and inorganic piece of finality" (though, it must be said, he misses an obvious parallelism by ignoring the shift in stanza one, and thus distorts the structure); of Suckling's ending we could justifiably say that it is a genuine and organic piece of finality.

The success of the irony, then, rests on our being in on the joke. If we were to imagine that Suckling himself suddenly woke up at the end, to find out what was really bothering him, then much of the delicate adjustments of the writing earlier would have been overlooked. It makes very little difference if we assume that the speaker of Habington's *Fine young folly* realises that he is not as certain of himself as appears on the surface, especially as this is a song from a play. We can take it that the author himself was

deceived; the total effect is of a man shouting to try and convince himself he doesn't feel a woman's sexual power. In either case, the poem makes sense. We need no more believe that Habington knew exactly what was going on than we need suppose that Trollope realises what an egregious ass Johnny Eames is. But in the case of the Suckling poem, there can be no question of the intentionalist fallacy. The nuances of tone are controlled throughout so as to make the ending possible; the other stanzas are working for a situation where such a close will not seem clownish or cynical.

The opening retains something of that virile, thoroughgoing manner which is usual with Suckling, even though the more run-bustious note is absent here. Despite the long vowels and slightly whispering effect of the sibilants, the effect is far from plangent. The question proposed seems a trifle pompous in its formulation, but by the end of the first stanza it is still not clear that the ostensible subject is little more than a decoy. "Kind" has the primary sense of obliging, complaisant, but when it is echoed later we invest it retrospectively with some associations proper to kind usage—thus we are half led to thinking that the ghost is of a lover kindly treated, and the question of stanza two is begged before it apparently arises. There is room for acres of Empsonian analysis on "strangely"; a perusal of the N.E.D. would doubtless show the sense possible in the 1640's, but it seems that as well as "untypically (for me)", "inordinately", there is an idea of "unaccountably", "for no good reason". The impression then is, "I have an inexplicable curiosity—it wouldn't do me much good down here (and that's what I'm really interested in) even if I did know." As early as this, consequently, the possibility that the issue is a wholly academic one begins to be slightly felt.

The second stanza opens and closes in a more characteristically jaunty fashion. "Dear", at first sight a rather gauche choice, turns out to be very apt; it conveys the idea of enjoyment squeezed out from privation, and Suckling manages to express through it his scorn for patient acceptance of failure: he at least will not hug his sorrows and pretend he is satisfied. Once more the ending is foreshadowed. Lines four and five seem awkward in construction, and the curiously ceremonious note is to appear later. It is Suckling's way of asserting his detachment from the laurels and the rest. Where he affects the high-falutin', some such covert sneer is often apparent. Some editors, incidentally, omit the comma after "crown'd", but, apart from being perfectly good rhetorical punctuation in the old way, it has the value of emphasising this formality. "Wise" is another rich, clinching word and again it somewhat begs the question—presumably the fate in store for a successful lover would enter into a judgment of this kind.

The second word, "posture", dominates the next stanza. It invites a clearer visual response than the other parts of the poem, and supplies a grotesque, harsher touch. But the ridicule inspired by

the general statement is diminished by the particular instance in the last three lines. Again the phrasing is a little decorous, and we can hear behind the lines a mocking suggestion that the fault lies in the lover's plight here and now, and that is what demands a remedy. "Still" we must surely take in the modern sense.

The tone of the poem, which up till now has veered between the quizzical and the not-quite-sneering, now becomes openly satirical. It is perfectly obvious that such a catalogue of names will not strengthen the case argued; the assertion is simply made, "For there the judges all are just", and with the air of a small boy documenting his lies with irrelevant detail Suckling launches into a list of ill-assorted figures. Nowadays practically everyone would have to turn up Brewer or the Oxford Companion to identify Syphax and Masinissa, and though the allusion to Sidney's *Arcadia* might be more familiar the reference is filled out with almost embarrassing completeness. The poet is not referring in an offhand way to cases which might excite sympathy, and so pity for him in his forlorn state; it is just a roll-call of certain interested parties. We could even take it that the lover feigns an idyllic daydream, knowing very well that his case will hardly seem on the same level.

The last stanza opens abruptly with a positive suggestion as to how the apparent sufferers might be compensated. The mark of honour, which seemed seriously considered at the opening (if not prized very highly) is now seen as tawdry and foolish in its obtrusive distinctiveness. The "noble" martyrs is now wholly ironic as an expressions, where earlier it would only be surprising or hyperbolic. "Perchance" preserves the note of casual improvisation: "there might be something of the kind, but it would be worthless." It is a real achievement (and an index of Suckling's skill in transposition) to have made the alternative now seem so bleak, where the issue excited a real curiosity at the outset. Long before the last line the choice is weighed, and Suckling can even permit himself an arch aside in the penultimate line. There is play again on "kind"; the first instance gives us a stock phrase beautifully renovated by the juxtaposition of the stronger terms, "noble Martyrs"—perhaps implying that real nobility is attained by sufferings on earth, beside which the honoured state afterwards is benign and amiable—and by the reference back to the opening stanza.

Evidently the poem is a carefully achieved whole, combining a number of ironic devices to establish a mode in which the triviality of what is being said grows more and more apparent. At each successive stage it becomes clearer that the question proposed evades the main issue, and if solved wouldn't settle anything. In this light the apparent cry of disillusion and weariness at the opening shows up, not as petulance, but as the rationalising, object-seeking mood of one not resigned to failure. A careful reading suggests a basically healthy attitude, neither cynical nor dispirited, in which the

lover's awareness of his own vagaries plays some part. This is the sort of complex self-dramatisation which the early seventeenth-century poets did well on so many occasions. The seemingly casual manner is deceptive; so slight a touch as the introduction of the word "perchance" produces a precise, localisable effect (heightened for us, if not for Suckling's contemporaries, by the brackets). We could adduce a phrase of Stanley's a few years later to bring out the refinement of meaning, the underlying *seriousness* of the style: "... at best a sacrilegious modestie". There is much more to Suckling than the history of literature summaries usually admit; the crude dilettante with a happy knack for versifying would not have been capable of sustaining the irony of this poem.

I have used a single poem to demonstrate one application of the mode; but some general comments are inevitable, and as illustration I intend to play off against Suckling a poet who is often alleged to owe most to the Cavalier lyricists. John Crowe Ransom.

In talking of Ransom's irony, a quality every commentator has noted, we should do well to eliminate the notion of a vague and generally ambivalent attitude. It is, perhaps, a sign of the times that we should have recourse to a term which implies a flexible and comprehensive response to experience, and then start by drawing up limitations. But when Herbert Muller attacks Cleanth Brooks for the stress on ironic "contemplation", and adds "No forthright expression of a faith or ideal can bear such contemplation", we can only repeat that such a view betrays a complete misunderstanding of the kind of thing irony can achieve. The conception of irony as an over-subtle, evasive technique favoured only by those unwilling to commit themselves to a definite, paraphrasable statement is one which does, of course, militate against the appreciation of Cowper and Wordsworth, as well as of Cowley and Pope.

Irony, in fact, does not always involve an attitude so ambivalent that the surface manner is called in question. It is possible by adopting a certain conscious tone to insist on the validity of what is asserted and yet to hint at qualification or limitation. Conversely, the use of a sustained irony, as in *The Modest Proposal*, needn't constitute a positive statement of views diametrically opposed to those ostensibly put forward. The device merely recognises the possibility of more than a single attitude and presents the reader more or less implicitly with others that could be viable: tone is of use in enforcing one of the attitudes, in certain cases, but it can't entirely subdue the others.

Frequently in Ransom's work we meet people disenchanted, condemned to failure. But he does not portray such people as admirable, for no one could be less of a sentimentalist. His Emma Bovarys, who refuse to come to terms with reality, are not scorned for their romantic ideas: at the same time, they aren't bathed in a

pink radiance. Perhaps it would be better to say both attitudes are allowed for, though neither expressed. These people fail, as (it is suggested) in the world they must: Ransom hints that they may have some compensation, then at the end retracts. The complexity of this presentation echoes breadth and disparate quality of experience itself. *Captain Carpenter* is a case in point. Ransom writes after the Captain's death: "I thought him Sirs an honest gentleman", but we know from the poem as a whole that the wicked deed of "sleek upstarts" is not everything; Carpenter's own weakness is stressed as partly responsible. The last two stanzas are ironic, then; but the irony is not inclusive and the earlier judgment is allowed in some measure to stand.

In other poems, Philomela's "classics registered a little flat", while the Persistent Explorer finds that the cascade contains only the "insipid chemical H<sub>2</sub>O" despite his impression that what he can hear is more than water. Both postulate a kind of romantic fallacy. Ransom does not, however, state that later disillusion would be justified; these are serious poems, one might say, in so far as they abjure any comment. Much of their worth lies in the rejection of over-facile reactions to a situation; in spotting the ambiguity in the poem's technique the reader is forced to consider the complexity of experience as such. In *Painted Head*, the "capital irony" is that of painting a head, known to be anonymous and "homekeeping" without its body. Irony then would reside in describing in terms known to be untrue—and this generates a certain amount of light on Ransom's own technique. Ransom assumes a norm, a standard, likely response to a lady's death, for example, or a girl dismissing her lover. His irony is controlled and the complexity not bewilderingly great because there is always a tenable attitude to which others can be related.

The ironic mode Suckling uses is far simpler, of course. But it rests on a similar belief that it is possible to sustain an oblique commentary so as to achieve an effect which would otherwise be impossible. That is the defence of irony. Not that explicit comment would be too crass, or too longwinded, or too pernickety. Irony can make statements which simply do not exist in any form until they are conceived ironically. There is some danger that if we go on writing tomes about *Irony as Defense and Discovery* and the like we shall forget that irony can also be a simple, positive instrument. Neither Suckling nor Ransom uses the mode as a shield; and Suckling, indeed, adopts its most chastened form, where the joke is of writing a poem about what concerns you least in a given situation. The irony is finding out what to be ironic about (and pretending not to have done). It uses the mode in a manner later centuries, by and large, were not very good at, and it is a strand in our literature that is worth keeping alive.

PAT ROGERS.

## *A Christmas Recalled*

The water pushed at its thin scud of oil  
And knocked the musseled rocks, the opal broke,  
Its skin of lights went out—the prawns were small  
A foot down in the water jerking at  
My glass bottle; from the dock cranes smoke  
Stood straight up, the gulls and cicadas noisily sat  
On our huge summer, even the air was fat.

Summer was December and the water sounds  
Of the presiding Harbour—ferries named  
For Governors' ladies wallowed round  
The river bends, past one haunted house, by  
A thousand boatsheds, past the water games  
Of spartan Girls' Schools, regatta crowded bays,  
Resting heavily at barnacled, bituminous quays.

In this time I heard my uncle calling to my mother :  
"Marion, I've made a new one, give it a try."  
I saw my face stretched in the cocktail shaker  
When I wiped the condensation off ; we were  
A drinking family and I would quietly lie  
Eight years old drinking Schweppes in bed, their  
Noise a secure lullaby, sipping at my fear.

But after eating too much one bloated day  
When I broke three toys wantonly and clumsily  
My uncle started to talk of war, not the way  
Men talk of the Last War but as prophets do  
Of retribution : "We've got about two or three  
Years before the Japs come," and I ran to  
The garden to cry—wars were not new

To any innocence, I thought of them  
As I sat crying under the pepperina tree.  
I thought too of death which was a word like "When"  
And not a thing like cat, so as they called  
Me in for washing-up I looked to see  
If they had painted what their talk foresaw  
On their Christmas faces, the picture of a war.

PETER PORTER.

## Book Reviews

THE ECCENTRIC DESIGN, by Marius Bewley.

(Chatto and Windus, 25s.)

Nearly forty years ago Lawrence wrote this :

Out! Out! he cries, in all kinds of euphemisms.

He's got to have his new skin on him before ever he can get out.

And he's got to get out before his new skin can ever be his own skin.

So there he is, a torn, divided monster.

The true American, who writhes and writhes like a snake that is long in sloughing.

and this :

The essential American soul is hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer. It has never yet melted.

To-day Mr. Bewley speaks of 'the tragedy of the American vision' and of 'the American artist confronting his own spiritual needs in all the terrible deprivation of his stark American condition'. For many non-Americans—and Americans—these may seem to represent extreme attitudes, but the fact that their challenge is based on different premises in the two writers may give them added persuasiveness. However that may be, Mr. Bewley's treatment of the American novelists whom he sees as constituting a tradition depends on the assumption that there is a radical and terrifying division in the American consciousness.

Assumption? The question cannot be more fully discussed here than a consideration of Mr. Bewley's intentions in his book will allow, but for those of us who as non-Americans have done some thinking about America over the past twenty or thirty years Mr. Bewley has much of profound interest to say.

No one is likely to dispute the difficulty of reaching conclusions. What, we may ask ourselves, is American-ness? Was Marshall Aid an effect primarily of generosity or expediency? How far does American money-snobbery govern behaviour and encourage what (vicious) tendencies in the individual and the nation? Is it worse or more influential than our own brands of snobbery? What were the *real* motives for Hiroshima? Why the violently antithetical views of Senators, fundamentally antithetical, about ourselves? Whether our answers are rationalisations for the benefit of our self-esteem or our material well-being or whether we are seeking 'the truth' to the best of our ability, we can learn a great deal about 'the American' by way of Mr. Bewley's intelligence and insight. Now more than ever seems it rich to drive in a Cadillac, and if we are going to escape the ultimate débâcle of physical destruction we must give to our thinking the disinterestedness and the justice which mark Mr. Bewley's.

*The Eccentric Design* deals with five novelists: Cooper, Hawthorne, Melville, James, and Scott Fitzgerald. A shock to many readers, that last name, but there it is. Briefly, Mr. Bewley's argument is this: American life, for several reasons more and less obvious, has lacked the richness of texture, the density, the variety of 'manners' out of which writers in Europe have made their novels. James's famous list of lacks, itself suggested by Hawthorne, is invoked and confirmed. The consequence of this thinness for American writers is to impel them to the creation not of individuated characters against a social background but of symbolic figures who with the world they move in represent the writer's awareness of the peculiarly American division in consciousness and the attempt to deal with it in art. This symbolism is of course much clearer in some writers than in others; in Melville than in James, e.g.

At first we may be inclined to doubt the extent of the American rift and painfulness. But in the end we have been given so much information and in general convincing interpretation that we have no choice but to believe that that is how it appears to a sensitive American. There are Lawrence's *Studies* to bear in mind too. It is possible to list as a rough guide some of the elements given by Mr. Bewley as forming the American identity of consciousness, the elements that make up the tensions which shaped the creative impulses of the novelists.

Roughly then: various influences of economists and politicians—the republicanism with an aristocratic bias of John Adams, money as the primary aim (Alexander Hamilton), true warm democratic spirit with a sense of the worth also of opposing values (Jefferson); increase of material wealth with increase of spiritual vulgarity; treatment of the Indians; political virtue with cultural deficiency; the 'aristocracy' of artistic activity in a democratic community; the dark moral laws of Puritanism with the forward-looking optimism of the new America, Calvinism and Transcendentalism, past and present; Europe in the New World. We could produce a history of our own making for our own moral ambiguities, but Mr. Bewley does succeed in presenting a specifically American perplexing consciousness. How is it manifested and dealt with in the novelists?

Mr. Bewley shows us Fenimore Cooper as more politically and socially minded than some of us had known. He was, for instance, intelligently interested in such a matter as the source of wealth, of money. Hating the new financial aristocracy and the changes in the forms of life it was bringing about, he created Natty Bumppo, not as an ordinary fictional character but as a symbol to be 'perpetual reproach'. Cooper was attempting in his novels to clarify his own experience as an American, and Mr. Bewley finely indicates with comment and quotation the maturity of the attitudes towards (say) the Indian and the forest that we find in the Leatherstocking series. Mr. Bewley firmly distinguishes between the poor

and the good among Cooper's novels. That in my own view he slightly overestimates the good is not of so much account as the fact that he shows us a Cooper who is so much more than a novelist of conventional adventure and romance.

For Hawthorne, with a keen feeling of the 'magnetic chain of humanity' and of the danger to himself, as an artist, of developing a merely spectatorial attitude, the explicit problem was to find wherein lay fullness of life. In a number of convincing analyses, one of which deals with the muddle of *The Blithedale Romance* and another with the 'great masterpiece' *The Scarlet Letter*, Mr. Bewley shows how Hawthorne's 'inner sphere of reality' which is reciprocity of feeling, is an all-important idea or fact in his endeavour to confront the perplexity that his pondering on solitude-and-society caused in him. Perhaps Mr. Bewley might profitably have emphasised more than he does that the knowledge of a valid 'inner sphere' was not in itself enough to give Hawthorne's work the necessary fullness in reality to offset completely his sense of 'the world's artificial system'.

Where Cooper and Hawthorne (and James) are primarily interested in good and evil as it affects men in society, Melville's concern, says Mr. Bewley, is 'metaphysically more pure'. The concern leads Melville to give (in *The Confidence Man*) an 'appalling picture of the American mind and heart', and leads him finally into a confusion of indistinguishable good and evil. On the other hand, *Moby Dick* (we are shown), while suggesting a profound ambiguity in Melville's vision of God and good and evil in a self-destructive universe, has 'a positive and coherent form' if we see that Ishmael has a quest as well as Ahab: 'the sea is the source of life in the world, and it is to the sea that Ishmael returns whenever he feels symptoms of depression. . . . It is a quest for spiritual health, a desire to enter into a new and deeper harmony with creation. Ishmael accepts the mystery of creation—particularly as embodied in Leviathan—which Ahab does not.' Leviathan is Creation, attacked and racked by man: Ahab is to Melville an image of (in particular) ruthless nineteenth-century economic man. Mr. Bewley's interpretation—which I cannot avoid simplifying in summary—seems to me wholly convincing. In a discussion of *Kings I*, chapter 22, King Ahab is shown to be a 'petulant self-asserter', perversely insisting, like Melville's Ahab, on going into futile conflict. The wonderful chapter describing the whales and their feeding young in the calm depths has significance as an image of primal innocence: then the horror of harpoons in breasts. Mr. Bewley substantiates his statement that *Moby Dick* presents 'a religious intuition of life itself in some of its most basic and positive affirmations'; there is moral action and direction, Ishmael achieves it. The novel answers to Mr. Bewley's belief that form is an action, and action is 'the intensified motion of life in which the moral and spiritual faculties of men are no less engaged than their

physical selves'. After *Moby Dick*, Melville disintegrates: clarity is lost, and the dialogues and discussions of *Pierre* and *The Confidence Man*, emptying life of meaning, are a quite different thing from the *structural* dialectic of *Moby Dick*. Mr. Bewley's insights, then, make clear much that was previously obscure; in enriching the text they do justice to Melville, for they are relevant in important places. But neither they nor (it is likely) anything else can persuade us that there are not large portions of *Moby Dick* that can be seen as part of the structure only by virtue of their 'whale' subject matter.

'When the American artist dealt with (life) successfully,' writes Mr. Bewley, 'it was in the primitive wilderness, on a raft in the middle of the Mississippi, or on a whaling-boat in the Pacific, and it is difficult to imagine James at home in any of these places.' An amusing understatement, though the thought is hardly new. But Mr. Bewley's point is that James, seeking to 'treat life', failed to find enough of it in America, and as he knew what 'life' meant and so knew what his characters were being deprived of, his theme became the great one of 'deprivation of life'. Mr. Bewley is admirably careful in his dealing with 'life'. See, for instance, pages 238-9, where he indicates why it was so difficult for James to realise life as Lawrence realised it: 'But in the abstract, intellectualizing, democratic, American tradition, filled with disembodied ideas and aspirations, and empty of the concrete, man-soiled evidences of a living humanity, the first problem was to say what life was.' We may not be one hundred per cent. convinced by this, we may believe that there were factors connected with the man and not only the American which caused the comparative lack of positive fullness of life, life felt and realised at all points, in James. But most readers will agree with Mr. Bewley when he insists that the lack is only comparative. How James was troubled in later years by his coming to know more about the monstrousness of the economic age in America, how that age militated against the possibility of fineness of living for the individual, how his further knowledge palpably broke into his participation in the great American Dream, are points made by Mr. Bewley in a most informative chapter called 'Henry James and the Economic Age'.

The American Dream: Scott Fitzgerald and *The Great Gatsby*. I have not read the whole of Fitzgerald, but I do not believe he is the great writer held up for us by Mr. Bewley (and by Lionel Trilling and others). Mr. Bewley believes that *Gatsby* is a mythic embodiment in the great American tradition of Natty Bumppo and Huck Finn and Ishmael'. *Gatsby* may well be intended as a mythical figure, but if we feel him alive enough to warrant us admitting a slight pathos in his ending up as he did, surely we must still—if we give full attention to the writing and not to an intention—see him as an unbelievably romantic and uninteresting

simpleton. Is there anything anywhere in the book to justify this interpretation of Gatsby: 'On the other hand, the reality is embodied in Gatsby; and as opposed to the hard, tangible illusions, the reality is a thing of the spirit, a promise rather than the possession of a vision, a faith in the half-glimpsed, but hardly understood, possibilities of life.'? What value *The Great Gatsby* has (for me) is in a certain clear-sightedness about some modes of behaviour in that layer of society though what does he weigh the behaviour against? an adequacy in his use of words for his rather limited purposes (though inflated a times, pseudo profound), and some efficient though not remarkable) 'atmospheric' writing. Seriously intentioned? Well, yes. But think of *St. Mawr*, also a book of the 'twenties, and also about an American seeking a 'reality', and where does Fitzgerald, however serious and respectable? a big question this stand beside *its* insight, moral searching, vigour, wit, variety of tone and scene, power of symbol and splendour of description? *The Diamond as Big as the Ritz* I have not read. From Mr. Bewley's lengthy account should we be justified in deducing that it would seem to be interesting in its fancifulness but rather unsubtle and heavily elaborated, the manifestations of material wealth overdone? I don't know. I shall hasten to read it.

In his Preface to *The Eccentric Design* Mr. Bewley is justly ironical about certain things connected with the reception of his first (most valuable) book, *The Complex Fate*. His present book demands and deserves our best attention. If his conceptions of form and tradition occasionally make him give too little consideration to the teeming surfaces of novels, where the writer's mind and feelings glance and move and ultimately have their being—and has the American scene been quite as thin in material as Hawthorne and James and Mr. Bewley and others have claimed—nevertheless the intelligence applying the conceptions illuminates much that was previously obscure and often directs us to a significant further dimension. I am sure most of us will know very much more than we did about America and American literature when we have read Mr. Bewley's book.

H. COOMBES.

**COLLECTED POEMS, 1959: Robert Graves.** (Cassell, 25/-)

Reviewers of poetry, mostly practising poets themselves, justly admire the skill of Robert Graves, his control over his sensibility, knowledge of his limitations. When his whole output with literally hundreds of well-executed poems is considered, their admiration must be shared. "A true poet," they insist, "devoted to his craft." With this, together with its qualifying implications, one must, again, agree. Locally, Graves can seldom be faulted. If a scene is left unvisualised, it is because a point can be more precisely made through speech-rhythms alone, as in *The Thieves*.

*After, when they disentwine  
You from me and yours from mine,  
Neither can be certain who  
Was I whose mine was you.*

If a poem ends with a romantic gesture

*To court the queen in her high silk pavilion*  
it may well be a means of placing what has gone before—in this instance, the poet's life-battered face. Whatever reasons there are for denying Graves the status of a major poet, they are unlikely to be concerned with accuracy of presentation.

On the contrary, he presents his poems admirably. But admiring a poem isn't the same as entering into it. A surprising amount of Graves's work relies on premises of which he feels so certain that no effort of persuasion is made. Unless the reader shares similar experience of Graves's characteristic themes—sub-natural beings, nightmare, body-disgust, uneasy love—they are likely to remain personal preoccupations of the poet, recreated in verse but not actively engaging him in the way that Yeats's major poems, equally based on private experience, do.

*Never such love* would be generally agreed as Graves at his best. Already, at the beginning, there is an underlying assurance that we, too, will feel this (obvious) disgust at the act of love.

*Twined together, and, as is customary  
For words of rapture groping, they  
Never such love, swore, ever before was.  
Contrast with all loves that had failed or staled  
Registered their own as love indeed.*

The deliberate unpleasantness of "twined", the weariness of "as is customary", the cynicism of "for words of rapture groping" show a habituated state of mind. One begins to ask how the lovers arrived at this condition of sad satiety before realising that the satiety and disgust is that of the poet and that it is so habitual (there are, indeed, scores of poems on the same theme) as to require no justification—for him. If this stanza were a third person's description of sexual intercourse, perhaps no justification would be needed. But the emotion informing it does not emanate from disgust with lovers so much as from disgust with love

*. . . the near-honourable malady  
With which in greed and haste they  
Each other do infect and curse. . . .*

Not always, one might protest at this assumption of inevitability, and not necessarily.

This kind of feeling is associated with a dislike of physical being which when presented is again more easily admired as verse than entered into as poetry.

*Magnified one thousand times, the insect  
Looks farcically human; laugh if you will!  
Bald head, stage-fairy wings, blear eyes  
A caved-in chest, hairy black mandibles  
Long spindly shanks.*

The blue-fly is almost wilfully distorted into Graves's view of the human body against which in many other poems he rages.

*I'll cool you, body, with a hot sun that draws the sweat,  
I'll warm you, body with ice-water that stings the blood,  
I'll enrage you, body, with idleness, to do  
And having done to sleep the long night through:  
Trudge, body.*

There is no sense of any spirit inherent in the body. The rage is activated by Graves's certainty that the trudging body is himself and that this is all.

The cumulative effect of his work is negation, the devoted rendering of life-disgust. Tormented by the Succubus—forcefully presented

*Gulping away your soul, she lies so close . . .  
. . . with hot face,  
With paunched and uddered carcass,  
Sudden and greedily does she embrace,*

—he can only seek moral refuge in

*beauty*

*Slender and cool with limbs lovely to see*

which is a conventional abstraction.

This is not to deny that such gestures achieve permanent expression in some of his finest poems, such as *Sick Love*.

*O Love be fed with apples while you may,  
And feel the sun and go in royal array,  
A smiling innocent on the heavenly causeway.*

Although the imagery is generalised, the effect is not that of convention or rhetoric. One feels, in the tension set up between the romantic image of love and the urgency of tone and movement (confirming the explicit temporality of "while you may"), the pressure of much particular experience. The effect of the poem, for all its apparent romanticising, is that of uneasiness, crystallised in the balance held—just—between.

*the cry*  
*That soars in outer blackness dimly*  
and love

*Exquisite in the pulse of tainted blood.*  
Even here Graves finds the qualification "tainted" necessary, because he says, addressing love,

*Take your delight in momentariness,  
Walk between dark and dark—a shining space  
With the grave's narrowness, though not its peace.*

The last line relaxes rhythmically at the introduction of death as a rest from "the listening horror", "the shivering glory". So, even in this assertion of the possibility of delight in love, Graves leaves us with a feeling that death is nevertheless the real end—in more than one sense—of life.

Graves does posit ideals, however, though seldom as successfully as this qualified one in *Sick Love*. They may be seen in *The Cloak* the approval of the Great Personage, in *Midwinter Wakening* as a recognition of the power of poetry, in *Broken Images* as apparent self-awareness—

*He in a new confusion of his understanding;  
I in a new understanding of my confusion*

though the assurance of tone seems inappropriate to the degree of understanding asserted here. Graves may indeed feel confusion; at times I wish he would try to understand it less and allow it to come at us more. The experience seems too often to be rendered down in its perfect phrasing.

Often such high ideals are forsaken for a vigour of life celebrated in *Rocky Acres*

*This is a wild land, country of my choice,  
in Ogres and Pygmies,  
They dug great pits and heaped huge mounds,  
Deflected rivers, wrestled with the bear,  
And hammered judgments for posterity . . .*

But Graves doesn't do much more than celebrate such vigour. The manner of the verse plays it down too much. Even in so good a poem as *The Cuirassiers of the Frontier* one cannot help recognising the divergence between Graves's explicit sympathy with tough actualities and the sophistication and polish of his presentation of them.

*In Peter's church there is no faith or truth  
Nor justice anywhere in palace or court.  
That we continue watchful on the rampart  
Concerns no priest. A gaping silken dragon  
Puffed by the wind suffices us for God.  
We, not the city, are the Empire's soul;  
A rotten tree lives only in its rind.*

Graves, we feel, is fighting well but on the wrong side. If he really thought beans and bowstrings and endless sentry-duty were preferable to decadent Rome, he wouldn't write like that.

In much the same way, those poems hating physical life and rejecting it are accomplished most lovingly. The feeling is too conscientiously wrought into "poetic shape"; there is too great a gap between experience and creation. We have to accept Graves's premises whereas we should find ourselves included in the poems before we could start to question them. Graves's reactions to life seem to be subordinated to the craft with which he conveys them. His poems do not widen our capacity for experience as *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* does. And Pound in his chronicle of "a botched civilisation" can posit an ideal to place it the more convincingly for not sacrificing his being as a man for that of a poet.

Such a sacrifice does, however, commend Graves to his fellows though, as I have tried to show, being "a true poet" means accepting certain limitations. I have deliberately confined my remarks to those poems I believe to be among Graves's best. That means that they probably rank with the best verse but below the few great poems written since the centrality of poetry as an art-form ceased with the death or dodoism of the great Romantics. When compared with the hard economy of Norman Cameron, adept yet excluding so much of life, the distancing but too often unbacked rhetoric of John Crowe Ransome, the discursive meditation of Edwin Muir, only alive at secondhand when informed with the literary inspiration of Wordsworth and Eliot, Graves's successes seem assured and attractive. How limiting such adjectives are may be seen if we compare his nightmare-evocation with that of Hopkins, his self-disgust with the despair of Eliot, his love poetry with that of Hardy, his awareness of the possibilities of life with that of Lawrence.

PHILIP HOBSBAUM.

### **THIRD DAY LUCKY: Robin Skelton.**

(O.U.P., 12s. 6d.)

I fear I got little pleasure from this second book by Robin Skelton (his first, *Patmos and Other Poems*, was published by the O.U.P. in 1955). It seems surprisingly amateurish for a lecturer in English (at Manchester): so much is simply the kind of thing which one writes when some object or event seems to call up a poem but which withers away on being compared to the poems on similar subjects which one knows are good. Mr. Skelton does not seem to have any strong visual imagination—nothing 'stands up and hits us': no musical imagination—his trite rhythms, usually perfectly regular and often rhymed, submerge any individual phrase which might have made us sit up to a monotonous flow of 'poetic' sonorities; and no particularly interesting or challenging responses—the poet never seems to be doing more than put down whatever

floated into his mind as vaguely appropriate: the sentiments are such as anyone might have, and are given no new force or meaning. We are not made to feel that Mr. Skelton's feelings are any more interesting than our own, though, to be sure, he attempts to convince us that they are:

*The lift of sky seduced us here  
to make the pathless sheer a feat  
significant in hope and fear  
but, pinned upon the need of near . . .*

This is from *The Climb*, each verse of which concludes respectively: "sometimes there is no way down", "sometimes there is no retreat", "always there is no way back". Unfortunately, we don't feel that he has committed himself to an exploit important or sensible enough for it to matter that there is no way out. Again, in a conversation about a childhood search for a rusty iron ball (a mine?) hidden between rocks on a beach, the local inhabitant confides that *I hide it here/When I was a child of God*. . . . In fact, the poem does put over quite well the excitement of childhood discoveries, but whatever symbolic or mythical value the iron ball may have for nostalgic grown-ups, it is the thing itself, if at all competently described, which conveys the emotion of a "lost childhood" or Eliot's "laughter in the garden"; to labour the point with so improbable a confidence merely seems an impertinence, "disrespectful to the children".

Mr. Skelton certainly seems to be occupied in his poems with a search for the "eternal significance" of the things which catch his attention: this lofty theme is tackled in a long poem, *The Descent of Light*, which gropes towards a rather anæmic, æsthetic sort of Christian belief and has—inevitably—some rather painful echoes of *The Hollow Men* and the *Four Quartets*. There are a few poems which do convey a sense of actuality—either of a scene or of someone really trying to clarify his ideas: *The Reply* is an agreeable piece of mirror dialogue, and *The Fence* concisely makes the familiar point that we are all busy investigating the problem of communication while our house is falling down. But most of the book is spun out from the old key words—light, darkness, peace, grace, vision, thought, act, love, fear, nature: such abstract words come all too easily. In *Pæan for the Makers*,

*Smart with his pen took fire and signed  
Each wall with creation's say.*

A seashell is a typical object of contemplation:—

*Cold miracle,  
each minute dying for air,  
lifting a sounding stair  
round the passionless will . . .*

If there was a 'tough' poetic diction for the 'fifties, there is still a 'soft' one, which Mr. Skelton uses far too freely.

ANDREW ROBERTS.

## CONTRIBUTORS

JANET BURROWAY	Marshall scholar from Barnard College, N.Y. Reads English at Newnham.
W. I. CARR	Research student at St. Catherine's.
H. COOMBS	Part-time lecturer for the W.E.A. (Western Region). Author of <i>Literature and Criticism</i> and <i>Edward Thomas</i> . Lives on the edge of the Cotswolds near Cheltenham.
PHILIP HOBSBAUM	Read English at Downing. Edited <i>Delta</i> 1954-55. At present researching into criticism under Professor Empson at Sheffield. He has just completed a novel.
PETER PORTER	Advertising copywriter. Has read his own poems on the Third Programme.
PAT ROGERS	Reads English at Fitzwilliam.

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